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Nights in Varmland

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Nights in Värmland

The sack hung about Paul's neck. He stood at the edge of the clearing. "Over here, Gunnar! How's your mother?" he asked.

"She complains of the cold," Gunnar said.

"And you?" asked Paul.

"I've no complaints at all. How would that look, my getting cold?"

"If I were cold, I wouldn't admit it either," said Paul. He had the face of an owl.

"But it's too late for *you*," Gunnar responded. "I'll pray for your rest."

"Don't, not for me," Paul said. He was forty-five. One hundred and forty-five.

Gunnar walked past him through the thicket into the wind. *The cold having taken them, such men as Paul are lost*, he thought. *In the treacherous snow, he's lived for years refusing prayer. Instead, he wanders the cold frozen with sin. Too far from the sun, he accepts the darkness and cold.*

The shelter where Gunnar lived faced the cardinal points. It was deliberately built that way. Gunnar headed toward it now thinking how you could guide yourself by the cross on the roof. It wouldn't let you stray.

Evil cold touches my face, but wandering, I'm still not lost with the cross up there. One can pray and mend his ways. The owls, wolves and bobcats are lost. Paul with the sack about his neck, the others, the hundreds of others, yes, they are all lost. Throughout the woods wander treacherous, evil, mean-spirited sinners consumed. But me? No. They have my prayers.

In the failing light, he made it home, the wooden cross guiding him. It looked somber against the sky. There were paths to the strange places where dead spirits stood. At night the air filled with smoke. These were the fires of men who couldn't be warmed. *The stinging night offers them nothing*, thought Gunnar. *There is little consolation in the eternal winter of this cold, dark place, only the snow drifting about the shelter's eaves and blinding their eyes on St. Lucia's night.*

Despite others available to him, Gunnar broke a new path going N-NE to avoid the cardinal points. They were good points, good directions from which a lost, wandering soul could learn—as they could from the crucifix. But you sometimes couldn't see the cardinal points in the night, and the cross was merely a shadow, the night offering nothing to go by. He'd done right, Gunnar told himself, to make a new path and to save for sinners

the ones that approached from the cardinal points. That was the right thing.

"Gunnar!" she hollered and banged the alarm kettle with her hammer. She expected something, Gunnar thought. A storm? her death? her very own death? Is that what she's doing? Banging it away with an alarm kettle? Keeping her own death at arm's length? Is she out-banging the noise of her sins with that hammer, outfoxing the noise of that cold with those blankets, those walls? I'm doing right building her inward, for strong walls keep sin out, I was taught. Walls keep Syl Magda safe inside. My mother: Mine. Syl Magda. No sin, shame, strife shall enter here tonight. Nothing shall attach itself here. No, not tonight . . . to her . . . No!

She lay in bed complaining when he came in from the fine snow that began to fall. And she kept on banging. When he told her, "the ice sparkles, will you come see it?" she banged out her sins with the hammer and dented kettle. When he said to her, "Mama, I'm going out shooting under the full risen moon," she wouldn't listen but kept banging at the kettle. "*Fader vår som är i himmelen*," Gunnar prayed. Outside, the fox made off with the winter's chickens. It was a sad, strange thing all around.

"Do you hear it in the chimney?" she asked over her banging.

"No."

He was wearing the lighter coat. He'd succeeded in boarding up an inside window—not with the broken hammer he'd fixed and given back to her to bang the kettle with, but with the good, sturdy hammer.

"Sleep?" he asked.

"No, put more rags under the door. I'm cold," she said.

"More rags," said Gunnar.

Clutching the hammer, he went to work across the room. Shaped and planed, some fresh boards waited. He set to on the north wall. With the saw, nails, chisel, plane, the rule, the two hammers—one sturdy, the other broken—he did his work. He raised the strong walls to shut Syl Magda in and keep her from cold. Outside, the world's sins and the cold wind, but inside the walls would keep her safe, warm, and quiet.

The pattern of the inner walls followed that of the outer. Already he'd raised beams and made a roof four feet below the original. The walls of the cabin were 30 × 35, the next room's 20 × 25. To keep her from evil, he'd built a house within a house, a cabin within a cabin, a prayer shelter within a prayer shelter. Then there was the newest room. Third, innermost, it stood another few feet in from the last one he'd built. He was working on it now.

Outside all these walls, the wind shook the treetops. In the new room, he caulked whatever holes or knots appeared in the boards. He'd built it with windows so that you could look right out through three prayer shelters—one inside (or outside) the next—to trees, to firs and white birches, trees of the night and winter time. But now he was boarding up these windows, not building or refurbishing the shelter and the windows, but boarding them up.

"Under the door there's a draft."

"Under which door?"

"I don't know. I'm mixed up," she said.

"There's nowhere else to move you. I'll come give up my coat."

He blew the sawdust away from where he was working, lay the coat gently on the four-post bed, which was wooden—handmade like everything else in there. Inside in the center, she lay, her bed raised on wooden blocks. On the elevated bed, she was higher than he.

"The chimney, is he there?"

"No," said Gunnar.

The woodstove by her bed provided heat to the cabin. Dust and soot filtered down when he craned his neck up into the cold fireplace chimney. (There were three fireplaces in the cabin too. He had laid stones for all of them. In every way the three fireplaces were identical.) He was busy-ing himself inside the shelter now.

She was right. In the chimney darkness: there was something up there.

He opened the door, rushed the few feet to the next, and through that to the next. Outside it was a night where sin lived. He shielded his eyes against the moon, saw something above. Now the river heaved and dislodged its ice in patterns on the shore.

"Come down," he yelled.

He could barely hear his mother call. "Do you hear it in the chimney outside?"

He didn't answer, could hear her hammer against the night.

The wind swirled. He'd left open his heart. He raced to the door. The wind ripped his coat. Sweeping the snow away, he slammed the big door shut, slammed another.

"Stay in," she said as he slammed the last. "Don't go. This night help to keep me from trouble. I'm seventy-nine."

She's not seventy-nine. She's little more than fifty-four. He didn't know what made her talk so. He thought of leaving forever the innermost shelter with the raised bed in the center. There was too much to find out in the forest dark. Sometimes he watched the night wheel by. Dressed in furs down on the river, he thought how he'd never been part of the night, not like the beasts whose skins he wore. In this cold land he'd observed night

and sin, but neither embraced nor understood them. Sin and the night world he'd never understood.

He and Syl Magda, his mother, had travelled here long ago searching for Gunnar's father, who'd set out from Värmland. Gunnar's father had sailed N-NW, becoming trapped in the ice, at which time he'd stepped out upon the windrow and died—not spiritually, not that way, for it was not a spiritual wanderer, but a good, honest man who died. Some peasants had sent him to the nearest village, which was named *Paradis* of all things—or *Djurgaard*. Finding Gunnar's father there on the northern ice, they'd sent him to *Paradis* and continued their own journeys looking, in sorrowful penitance, for loved ones who themselves had died, though in less desirable ways.

Gunnar was now twenty-two years in the Lord's service. Did one never quit? Coming north, he'd had no fear of being defiled. He'd never had cause to fear for his soul. "You can't and won't sin," they'd told him in the church as a child in Värmland. Over the years he'd prayed and kept lights in the prayer shelter's windows, lights in the night of death and smoke. It was his mission. *I'm ministering to dead souls in this outpost of faith. I can teach them. Like Paul, the owl-man, they are doomed, but I can teach them why they wander.* He kept a light in the prayer shelter so that if they should look in, it would be on the workings of the prayerful family; the mother and son, Gunnar and Syl Magda Johannsen. *As the farmer reaps wheat, so must I, at such great distance from the sun, reap snow. . . .*

"The chimney!" she yelled.

From the roof he heard cries. He didn't believe there was anyone out there. He stoked wood, added a log, went to bed. He was no part of the night world. He'd learned to sin, but in small ways. He'd felt neither terrible cold like her nor the night of sin. "There's no man up there," he yelled. "Nothing! No one."

Because he slept just outside the newest room (third, innermost), he found he must wear skins and furs to ward off cold.

In the morning he sprang up. He went outside to check the prayer shelter. Then he hurried back in, shut the door, then the next. It was a bad morning, and it chilled him—but not with the chill of sin. Was his own good, holy mother possessed of the night and cold? he wondered, closing the last door.

She held out her hands.

He soothed her. "What is he like, Gunnar Johannsen?" she whispered.

"No one's out there, no thing, Mama," he said.

"Well, do you have to keep going out?" she asked.

"I can work inside on your room. Are you any warmer? It's bad."

"No warmer. Is he up there?"

"No, no one," Gunnar said.

"You're lying. He's coming down trying to get me. I think he's the cold heart of my nature."

She rolled over. He fed the stove.

"The draft's bad," she complained.

"I'll go to work on it. Didn't I say I would?"

He was a builder, a keeper of a lighthouse. He climbed up on the ladder to the third room's ceiling. Efficiently and without complaint, he did God's bidding. He was a listener, too. At twenty-seven years of age, he sought the woods to understand what he could from them. He did not understand his good mother's suffering a sinner's torments.

That blustery day he worked round her bed, her face looking like a hawk's . . . a crow's, thought Gunnar. Her hands curled inside each other. She'd been that way a month. "The draft. Can you do something about it?" she begged.

"No, can *you* do something about it?"

He strung a line. He was touched with grief. Outside, people wandered. Perhaps I have brought cold into the house with me, he thought. Perhaps I am tainted with cold and coming unto her high, holy bed a sinner.

For only a minute she was without a blanket, long enough for him to run the rope line from one corner of the new prayer cabin to the other. Then he strung another line. When the ropes intersected, Gunnar moved her on the bed. The lines met over her belly, exactly there and she was centered. She was exactly as far from each corner. In the process she'd been blessed by the cross the ropes formed over her belly. He gave up a hearty thanks. Perhaps because of the sign of the cross formed by the rope she would be getting better, he thought. Perhaps that was what she needed.

The thing—it was an owl, a snowy owl with wings five feet across when it flew.

Going out, Gunnar carefully pulled rags from the bottom of each door, but replaced them carelessly on the outside. No doubt drafts would come in, he thought, but in the woods he couldn't hear a complaint anyway. To get away from here I can go as far as I choose, even out among the wolves and bobcats to learn of sin's cold, its grief.

When the moon was full bright, the crucifix threw its shadow from one

bank of the river to the other. He made squares out of the moon's pattern on the snow. Kneeling in the center of the frozen river, he threw off his cap. One square held his coat; one his boots; one his cap; the last his belt and gloves. Each square contained him no less than a minute before he retrieved his items from the treacherous snow. Paul watched him the night of the eclipse; Paul, the owl who was an old man.

"What are you doing?" he'd said.

"Praying," Gunnar'd responded. "New prayers. Never-said-before prayers. Come here with me to the center of the square. These aren't conventional prayers."

"See how you've destroyed the shadow of the cross? I'm not sorry for you, Gunnar," Paul said.

After that, Gunnar'd gone home and driven his nails truer than before. Later that night, he knelt and prayed again that the snow make better sense to him. But Syl Magda called to him, interrupting his prayers.

Under the bright moon, Gunnar spotted the owl. It had been two days up there.

"Come down from our roof!" he hollered. "What do you want? No one's here!"

It fluttered around in the chimney. He was silent, the moon gone under when he closed the outer door.

Past midnight she started the hollering and banging. From the outer rooms he rushed to where she lay.

"What is it up there on the roof? What do I hear all the time?" she asked.

"There's no one up there," Gunnar said. "I saw no one."

"You saw—"

"I saw no one up there."

"You wouldn't notice my dark nature," his mother said. "Look at me . . . my hands. Please light me a candle. Say prayers for my safe-keeping. Purge me with hyssop, son."

"Mama."

"I'm cold on this raised and centered bed now."

"I'll lower you."

"I know what he carries round his neck. See if he doesn't."

The light was dim. She complained to the crucifix over her bed. He prayed. She was silent, shaking.

"I can feel it," she said.

She was curling up on herself. Hands, arms, shoulders curling up.

"Father in heaven. . . ." he prayed, "*helgat varde Ditt namn*," then quit when he saw the owl's face in the window. Gunnar's ma thrashed about. He stoked the fire, bundled some furs over her. He went out of the

shelter where she yelled from the elevated bed, went out, shut the inner door, opened the next, shut that, opened the next. Snow flew up. He edged around the corner. He was standing there facing Paul, who had the bag slung about his neck. Paul waved, gave the bag to Gunnar. The snow came between them, and he was gone.

Indoors, Syl Magda was still crying. She'd gotten so thin, so old. He loved her. He was like her more than anyone at that moment. He stepped into the prayer shelter.

"You saw him, Gunnar. Please talk to me about him. I will choke on my words if you don't talk."

Gunnar was silent. When she started in this time, her voice was higher.

"I'm sick of the cold," she said.

"It's much warmer in here," he said.

She was talking about a coldness of sin he'd never felt.

"How did I know it was part of my nature to do what I did?" she said.

"That man out there who's trying to get in, he got a speck of something—soot, dust—in his eye once."

"Yes."

"I leaned over him, licked his eye in the old country way."

"With your tongue you licked his eye."

"I did lick his eye."

"And I was a baby in my chair, you said?"

"Yes. And this was in Värmland and your father had just set out to this mission place of dead souls. And this wasn't the one time that I licked his owl's eye. I willingly did so. You in your chair I turned to the wall and hummed a melody to calm you while he waited in the room's shadows. He looked ancient when a pine knot burst and threw sparks around his feet. By then your father was gone two months. Prayers to the Heavenly Father fell on deaf ears. . ."

Gunnar rose up, shook his head, took the cross from over her bed.

"I'm sick. I'm sick, dying. I can feel the cold, Gunnar. I'm full of sin's cold. Please pray and protect me, Gunnar!"

"Please pray and protect you," he said.

He gathered the crucifix, the rope he'd made measurements with, some drawings. Syl Magda begged him not to take them away. She was weak, curled around the blankets.

"I'm sick," he said. "I'm the sick one."

She was speaking to him as he left the room.

In the window the face of a man whose fingers scratch away at perpetual frosts peered in. Gunnar saw from inside the room, could watch him right through the windows. Gunnar carried the bag about his neck. There were the three of them in that desolate scene: Gunnar, Gunnar's mother, and

that cold and ancient master. She was wild. She didn't know where she was.

"Rest," he said.

She tossed her head from side to side. In the next room, he prayed. Not for her, but for himself. She appeared to twist in half. Bent up, old, she hollered for him.

"Son! Son!"

"Mother! Mother!"

He was praying hard. He read the sign in the window frost, the same as he'd made in the river snow.

"We cut each other's hair. We kept it in a bag. We did that," she said from the other room, "each time he came over. We talked about it. How evil! When ice went out into the lake my hair was on the table in Värmland. We'd cut it short. There was some power we shared. It wasn't a good thing, Gunnar. I'm not sure what to think about it. I didn't know he died—now to show up, the dead man at my door. He reminds me of the coldness and treachery of sin."

"You're not sure what to think," Gunnar said. He himself was learning from the forest. He'd learned things out there. Because of his faith he was *just* learning. One thing was a new way to worship. *That is why—no longer alive to the warmth of prayer—spirits wander in death outside the window. Without warmth, without hope of light.*

He shut his eyes, tried not to shout when he opened the bag that hung round his neck.

"I'm dying!" she yelled.

"You're dying," he said.

"Cover me from the cold, Gunnar."

"Cover *me* from the cold, mother!"

He turned his head away and with a chair propped open the inner door. He kicked rags from the bottom, opened the next door, kicked those away, opened the next . . . opened the entire shelter to the cold.

"Please help me," she said.

"Please help you," he said.

"I need some water now!"

"You need some water now."

He poured a cup from the dipper in the bucket. He dusted the surface with ash, handed her the cup.

"Thank you," she said.

"Yes. Thank me," he said.

In the other room, praying, he dressed for the forest cold. "*Jesu!*" he muttered on the way out.

Night trees caught his fur. He travelled through ash-dirtied snow to the

gloomy places of the soul, observed others silhouetted against their fires. Gunnar saw the twi-lit sky.

She licked his eye when he had something in it. That was not the first time. Before father died, she consorted with souls whose cries now echo the smoke-filled sky and hang like slate-gray ribbons from the trees.

Night and cold claim their own. But I am the truly sick one. For I renounce my building inward and my narrow rooms, a narrowness which I thought would provide. I renounce her—Syl Magda. And because now she begs in the midst of pleading for water and more covers, I throw off her blankets and salt her water with ash.

He went deeper, removing the wolves fur where some hazel brush had caught it. He was their keeper and the single light in the forest. He walked through their fires and knew he was their guide. Then he heard someone calling from deeper in yet, a man who looked like an owl.

"This way, Gunnar, here! You were teaching me down there on the river. Can you believe such a thing? That *you* were teaching me? Down on the river where the crucifix was. . . ."

Gunnar removed his heavy gloves. Now there was no fire. No light whatsoever brightened his face. A fierce crying off somewhere in the wilderness.

"Here, this way, Gunnar, this way where we no longer have to listen to her futile beating against the cold. . . ."